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**NOAA FISHERIES ISSUES EVALUATION OF FEDERAL IMPLEMENTATION
OF 2000 COLUMBIA BASIN SALMON BIOLOGICAL OPINION**
Agencies To Revise, Update Document in 2004

As part of requirements in a federal 2000 biological opinion (the "BiOp"), the National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) has issued a report concluding that, while some significant progress is being made, the three federal agencies charged with carrying out the ten-year Columbia River Basin salmon-recovery program are not fully meeting expectations, but are capable of timely resolution of the shortcomings.

NOAA Fisheries also noted that it continues to work with other regional federal agencies, following a federal court order, to update scientific data and revise the BiOp to ensure that it is legally and biologically defensible.

In May 2003, a federal district court ordered NOAA Fisheries to revise its BiOp on the operation of 14 major federal hydroelectric dams and other facilities in the region. The court found that the BiOp did not properly define the areas affected, and did not correctly consider future actions that may affect the listed species. The court set a deadline of June 2004 for the relevant federal agencies to revise the document, but ordered the BiOp to continue being implemented during this interim revision period, and required the agency to report quarterly on its progress.

Today's report sent by NOAA Fisheries to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Bonneville Power Administration and Bureau of Reclamation (the action agencies) tracks implementation progress on the Biological Opinion. The BiOp sets out specific requirements that NOAA Fisheries determined were needed to operate the federal hydropower system in the Columbia and Snake rivers to protect salmon and steelhead listed under the Endangered Species Act.

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The evaluation, signed by NOAA Fisheries Northwest Regional Administrator Bob Lohn, stated that although good progress was being made on many of the activities required by the biological opinion, there is still room for improvement.

“This is the first of a series of three check-in reports required by the 2000 BiOp,” Lohn said. “We delivered a tough, but thorough assessment of the federal agencies’ progress.” He noted concerns in the report that include delays in developing and funding local salmon recovery plans, and inadequate monitoring of the effectiveness of certain recovery measures. NOAA Fisheries has stated that these actions are important to identify major factors of declines in listed salmon stocks, and to measure the biological benefit of salmon recovery efforts already underway.

The NOAA Fisheries’ findings letter also noted that recent salmon returns in many areas have been much higher than expected, including record returns for various salmon stocks this year in many areas of the Columbia and Snake river system, thus reducing the short-term risk to salmon associated with some of the action agencies’ delays in implementation.

“We are encouraged that several runs have been doing much better than anticipated,” Lohn said, “and we will work with our federal partners to help build upon and maintain these positive trends.”

Lohn also emphasized NOAA Fisheries’ commitment to address deficiencies in the BiOp relating to the court’s order. “We will be working over the next several months to revise the BiOp to include updated science and data, and to ensure that it promotes solid biological benefit to listed salmon and addresses the court’s concerns,” Lohn said.

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through research to better understand weather and climate-related events and to manage wisely the nation's coastal and marine resources.

On the Web:

NOAA: <http://www.noaa.gov>

The NOAA 2003 evaluation report is available at: <http://www.nwr.noaa.gov>